Pentecost:

The Birth of the Church

Thrust Statement: **God wants His people to exhibit passion for the souls of men and women.**

Scripture Reading: **Acts 2:1-47**

PENTECOST:
BEGINNING OF GOD'S NEW COVENANT MOVEMENT

The story of Pentecost, as revealed in **Acts 2**, begins a movement that neither the powers of Rome nor the religious leaders of Israel could stop. This movement began with the conversion of approximately 3000 to Jesus of Nazareth. Following the Day of Pentecost, one observes the apostles and other Christians going forth with passion for lost souls, with power to preach the Gospel, and with purpose to reach people for Christ. These disciples had one thing in mind—the preaching of Jesus as the savior of the world. Today, Christians are to manifest this same passion for the unconverted, the same determination to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and the same purpose of making disciples for Jesus.

The story of Pentecost invokes the story of the Holy Spirit breathing a new community into life. One recalls how the outpouring of the Holy Spirit put, as it were, a fire into the hearts of the disciples of Jesus. This story of God's power on this particular day should still motivate every person to respond with great joy as he or she reflects upon God's regenerating power on that festival day. It was now fifty days since the Passover, and the Jews were celebrating the Feast of Weeks or the Festival of Weeks (**Deuteronomy 16:10**). This day was also called the Day of Firstfruits (**Numbers 28:26**). It was a festival of thanks for the harvest, which began immediately after the Passover (**Deuteronomy 16:9**). This culmination of the festival of thanks for the harvest is the day in which God added to His new community about 3000 souls.

Prior to the day of Pentecost, Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received the gift His Father had promised (**Acts 1:4**). So the disciples waited in Jerusalem for this gift of the Holy Spirit, which was poured out upon them (**2:1-4**). This act initiated the witnessing of the events that had transpired over a three-year period in which Jesus had conducted His ministry. Surely this event must have triggered in their minds the words Jesus had spoken ten days earlier: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (**1:8**).[1] Also, one cannot reflect upon this statement from the Lord Jesus without reflection upon His statement about the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (**Matthew 28:19-20**).

The Feast of Harvest:
God's Timing for the New Covenant Movement

God's timing for the proclamation of His way of salvation through Jesus is geared to reach out to a large number of individuals at one time. This Feast of Harvest celebration is appropriate. People came from various parts of the Roman Empire—Europe, Asia, and Africa (**Acts 2:5-12**). Luke captures this event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles with glowing words:

> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. [2] Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [3] They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues [a] as the Spirit enabled them (**2:1-4**).

Following this speaking in other languages—representative of seventeen nations present—Peter began to tell the multitude about this One who had been crucified less than two months earlier: "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know" (**2:22**). Not only did Peter call attention to the miraculous in Jesus' ministry, but also, in this same speech, he calls attention to their guilt and God's reaction: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (**2:36**). How did many of the individuals who witnessed this event and this preaching respond? Listen to Luke as he reports the outcome of this bold proclamation of God's Way of Salvation through Jesus Christ:

> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" [38] Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (**2:37-38**).

Three Thousand Responded to God's Grace

Upon hearing these words, Luke informs Theophilus that 3000 repented and were baptized: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (**2:41**). Yes, **Acts 2** is the story about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. Even though many of the events that transpired on this Day of Pentecost cannot be repeated, nevertheless Christians today can duplicate other things that permeated this body of believers—passion for the souls of men and women, motivation to tell the message of redemption, and an insatiable purpose in life to win people to Christ.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW COVENANT MOVEMENT

Passion for the Salvation of Souls

One cannot read the **Book of Acts** without a consciousness of a deep passion for the souls of men and women. Following the Day of Pentecost, one finds the disciples sharing the good news about God's way of salvation on a daily basis: "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, [47] praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (**2:46-47**). They were on fire for the Lord. They participated in public gatherings in the temple courts and in private gatherings in their homes. On one occasion, Peter went to the temple during the hour of prayer—at three in the afternoon—and, while there, he encountered a crippled beggar (over forty years old) whom he healed (**3:1-10**). This opened the door once more for him to witness concerning Jesus and talk about faith in the name of Jesus (**3:11-26**).

One catches a glimpse of the passion that Peter exhibited for the salvation of men and women. This miraculous healing opened the floodgates, as it were, for him and John to witness for Christ before the Sanhedrin (**4:1-22**). Again, Luke details for Theophilus the intensity with which they preached Jesus:

> The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. [42] Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ (**5:41-42**).

Numbers Increased to Five Thousand Men

Because of the passion for preaching Jesus, Luke reveals how the number of disciples (only men in this count) grew to five thousand within a short span of time (**4:4**). Philip preached to people in Samaria and many responded to "the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" by believing the preaching of Philip (**8:12**). The numbers of conversions are too numerous to analyze in this message, but the missionary journeys of Paul reveals the passion that he had in preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified.

GOD CAME TO SAVE SINNERS

Story by Tony Campolo

Do you have an intense yearning for the souls of men and women who do not know God? Are you only concerned about the so-called respectable? How do you feel about drug addicts? How do you feel about prostitutes? How do you feel about alcoholics? The following story is told by Tony Campolo, professor of sociology at Eastern College, which illustrates the concern for the lost, even prostitutes. He tells the story of his visit to Honolulu for a Christian conference. Early in the morning, he ventured out of his hotel to find a coffee shop. He found a tiny coffee shop and walked in and sat down. The following is his description of the events:

> The heavyset guy in a greasy apron behind the counter came over and asked me, "What do you want?" I told him I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut. As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door suddenly opened, swung wide and to my discomfort in marched 8 or 9 provocative and rather boisterous prostitutes. It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was garrulous, loud and crude. I felt completely out of place. I was just about to make my getaway when I heard the woman sitting next to me say, "You know, tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39." Her friend responded in a rather nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Do you want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"
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> "Come on," the women sitting next to me said, "why do you have to be so mean? I'm just telling you that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you that it is my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"
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> Tony Campolo said, "When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the woman left and then I called over to the counter to the heavyset guy and asked him, 'Do they come in here every night?'" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me", I asked, "does she come in here every night?" "Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why do you want to know?" "Because," I replied, "I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say we do something special for her? What do you think about throwing a birthday party for her, right here in the diner?"
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> A cute kind of smile crept over that heavyset man's chubby cheeks. He answered, "That's a great idea. I like it. That's great. Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind. I don't think anybody has ever done anything nice and kind for her." "Well, look" I told him, "if it is OK with you, I'll be back here tomorrow morning at 2:30. I'll decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake for her." "No way," he said, "the birthday cake, that's my thing. I'll bake the birthday cake. "Two-thirty the next morning, Campolo says, I was back at that diner. I picked up some crepe paper and other decorations at the store, and made a sign of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated that diner from one end to the other. I had that diner really looking great. The word must have gotten out on the street because by 3:15 that next morning every prostitute in Honolulu was in that place. There was wall-to-wall prostitutes—and me.

At 3:30 on the dot the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready; after all, I was sort of the informal master of ceremonies of this whole affair. It was my idea, so when they came in we all jumped up and screamed and we sang, “Happy birthday, Agnes!” And you know, I've never seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open, her knees started to buckle, her friend had to offer her arm to steady her, and I noticed she had started to cry.

When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, that’s when she just lost it. She started sobbing. Harry, in his gruff voice mumbled, “Blow out the candles, Agnes, blow out the candles.” Then he handed her a knife, and he ordered, “Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake.” Agnes looked down at that cake, and then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, “Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I, I mean, if I don’t, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don’t eat it right away?” Harry shrugged and answered, “Sure, Agnes, that’s fine, you want to keep the cake, keep the cake, take it home if you want.” “Oh, could I?” she asked. Agnes looked at Tony, “I live just down the street a couple doors; I want to take the cake home, is that OK? I'll be right back, honest.” She got off her stool, she picked up that cake, and she carried it out of that diner like it was the Holy Grail. She walked slowly toward the door, and we all stood there just speechless. When the door closed behind her, there was stunned silence in the place.

Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, “What do you say we pray together?” Looking back on it now, it seems more than a little strange that a sociologist from eastern PA would be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But I prayed. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her. And when I finished, Harry leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice he said, “Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of preacher are you anyway? What church do you belong to?” In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered him quietly, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.” Harry thought a moment, and then almost sneered as he answered, “No you don’t; there is no church like that. Because if there was one, I’d join it.”[2]

As one reflects upon this story, one should ask himself/herself: What is it that would entice a man to throw a birthday party for a prostitute? One cannot help but wonder if it is not a desire for the Day of Pentecost to stay alive and for others to repent and to be baptized and to receive the Holy Spirit and to be transformed by the power of God’s Spirit into a fighting force for the cause of Christ. Is not this kind of behavior the kind of behavior manifested by Jesus in His dealings with sinful humanity? Following the healing of a paralytic (**Matthew 9:1-8**), Matthew gives an account of Jesus reaction to the Pharisees’ condemnation of Jesus because He ate with “tax collectors and sinners”:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. [10] While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. [11] When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" [12] On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. [13] But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' [a] For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (**9:9-13**).

Power to Reach People for Christ

Just as the Holy Spirit enveloped the apostle on the day of Pentecost, so also, every person who responds to God's grace receives the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2:38**). Even though Christians today do not receive the unique outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the same sense that one witnesses on the Day of Pentecost, nevertheless, every Christian still receives the Holy Spirit as God's gift in order to affirm one's gift of eternal life. With this assurance of salvation, one can go, as it were, in the power of the Holy Spirit proclaiming God's way of salvation by grace through faith.

The church still needs individuals with a passion for the lost. How do you relate to the down-an-out losers of humanity? Are you concerned about their salvation? Are you burdened over the souls of lost men and women? Not only does the church need individuals with passion, but the church also needs individuals with motivation to reach out to those who do not know Jesus as the answer to the sin problem each person faces. As one analyzes the early Christian converts, one readily observes compulsion in their desire to reach out to the lost. One detects that there was power, compulsion, and motivation in their lives as they reached out to sinners to tell them about God's grace.

Is there the power of the Holy Spirit in your life? Is there compulsion in your life for the salvation of souls? Is there motivation in your life to reach out to sinners? As stated above, shortly after Pentecost, one reads that the "number of men grew to about five thousand" (**4:4**). There may well have been over ten thousand converts to Christianity by this time—men and women. Surely, this number of conversions represents the power behind the early church. How can you experience the power of the Holy Spirit? Perhaps, one today can experience the power of the Holy Spirit through association with other believers. Have you ever experienced the reality of Christ? Again, one can experience this reality of Christ by association with other believers.

Christians Do Not Live in Isolationism

Dwight L. Moody

One sure way for one not to experience the power of the Holy Spirit is to live in isolation from other believers. Surely there is truth in this statement: "There is no salvation outside the church." Again, one could say, "There is no Christianity without

communion." Once more, "There is no love without family." Dwight L. Moody once called on a leading citizen in Chicago to persuade him to accept Christ. After they were seated, he talked to him about the need to meet with the people of God on Sunday. But the man objected. He told Moody that he could be just as good a Christian outside the church as well as in it. Whereupon, Moody got up and walked over to the fireplace, without saying anything, and picked up the tongs and reached into the fireplace and picked up a blazing coal from the fire and set it off by itself. In silence the two men watched it smolder and eventually go out. The man looked at Moody and said, "I see."

The early church did not seek God's will in isolation from other believers. They were told not to abandon the assembling of themselves together (**Hebrews 10:25**). The church is the continuation of the Messianic ministry. There is no such thing as isolationism within the Christian community. Again, the early church did not seek God's will in seclusion. The Christian community is the company of the committed. It is a company of the redeemed. One cannot understand the idea of "a company" apart from involvement. Christ established His church as a revolutionary company in order to reach out to the world. Christ formed the church in order for it to become a fellowship of witnesses concerning Himself. When one is converted to Christ, this conversion, in and of itself, necessitates one's witnessing about the One whom God made both Lord and Christ.

Nature of the Church—Not A Building

As one wonders about the nature of the church, one should remember that the church is not a building. The church is people. The church building should be designed as a drill hall for the Christian task force. In other words, the church building should be a launching pad from which Christians are propelled out into the world to witness. The church is the fellowship of the committed. Do you have a mission? If not, then why not try winning your neighbor next door to Christ. The church needs to recapture the Christian banner of motivation to share with the world the message of redemption. The church today, as in the first century, can be a power for God.

The Church Must Have a Purpose

What does it mean to you to say that the church must have a purpose? In order for you to fulfill your function in God's community, you must understand that the goal of the church is to win people to Jesus Christ. Christians are partners with God in this wonderful scheme of redemption. It is in this regard that Paul writes:

> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! [18] All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: [19] that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. [20] We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. [21] God made him who had no sin to be sin[a] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain (**2 Corinthians 5:19—6:1**).

Are you going out into the streets with the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit? Are you going out into the world with the purpose of winning people to Christ? Do you remember your basic identity? You must! Every Christian must fulfill his or her basic purpose in life—lead souls to Jesus. Does a church that throws a birthday party for a prostitute at 3:30 in the morning impassion you? If not, why not?

CONCLUSION

Even though Christians cannot replicate the exact events that transpired on the Day of Pentecost, they can still capture the spirit and zeal that permeated the new community of God on earth. Christians can still exhibit a passion for the souls of men and women. Christians can still display power as a collective body of individuals in reaching out to the lost. Christians can still remember the purpose of their mission—wining souls to Jesus. Christians can still keep in mind their identity—children of God. What does the following words of Jesus mean to you: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (**Matthew 9:11**). Yes, Christians are to be "salt" and "light" in the world of corruption and darkness. Christians are to tell the lost about Jesus of Nazareth, the savior of the world.

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[1] All Scripture citations are from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), unless stated otherwise.

[2] I am indebted to Brett Blair, "Episode II: Birth of the Church," for this story (cited verbatim). See "Episode II: birth of the Church" [ONLINE]. Available from www.eSermons.com [accessed 17 May 2002, located under ESERMONS. To access the sermons on this website, one has to pay an annual fee of 49.95 (Level I).